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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Forty-fourth session
Item 12 of the provisional agenda

HUMAN RIGHTS AND SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Note by the Secretary-General

1. At its forty-second session in 1986, the Commission on Human Rights adopted resolution 1986/9, entitled "Use of scientific and technological developments for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms", in which the Commission on Human Rights invited the United Nations University, in cooperation with other interested academic and research institutions, to study both the positive and the negative impacts of scientific and technological developments on human rights and fundamental freedoms and expressed the hope that the United Nations University would inform the Commission on Human Rights of the results of this study.

2. The United Nations University duly submitted to the Commission, at its forty-fourth session, a preliminary report on human rights and scientific and technological developments (E/CN.4/1988/48). In its resolution 1988/59, the Commission invited the United Nations University to continue the study.

3. At its forty-sixth session, the Commission adopted resolution 1990/39, in which it invited the United Nations University, in cooperation with other interested academic and research institutions, to submit to the Commission at its forty-seventh session a final report of its study on the positive and negative impacts of scientific and technological developments on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

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4. By a letter dated 13 December 1990 addressed to the Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights, the United Nations University reported that, in response to the invitation by the Commission on Human Rights, it had studied the question of the positive and negative impacts of scientific and technological developments on human rights and fundamental freedoms and had published its findings as a booklet under the title Human Rights and Scientific and Technological Development. A few copies of the booklet 1/ are available (in English only) for consultation in the Centre for Human Rights.

5. The publication deals with the implications for development and human rights in Asia and Latin America of technology, the standard-setting role of the United Nations and the responsibility of the scientific community for promoting human rights. It concludes that science and technology are forces that have become too powerful and have too many ramifications to be left to take what direction they please. There is, therefore, an urgent need to guide and channel technology so as to make it an instrument for the furtherance of human rights, particularly in the developing world.

6. The substance and content of the publication are summarized and set forth in its conclusions and recommendations which were reproduced, with the permission of the University, in a note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.4/1991/38) for the Commission on Human Rights at its forty-seventh session.

7. During the discussion of the item on human rights and scientific and technological developments at the forty-seventh session of the Commission on Human Rights, two speakers made reference to the United Nations University study, one of them commending the United Nations University for the final report. That speaker agreed with the conclusions of the report, which particularly stressed the urgent need to channel technology to enhance the protection and promotion of human rights, particularly in the developing world. 2/

8. Another speaker noted that the University had responded to the Commission's invitation by launching a research project on the interrelationship between human rights and advances in science and technology, focusing especially on the interaction between socio-cultural, economic and political factors, on the one hand, and scientific and technological advancement, on the other. In the view of his delegation, the study made it clear that there was much scope for the process of guiding and channelling technology so as to make it an instrument for the furtherance of human rights in the developing world; it also emphasized that a vast number of research topics awaited attention. For those reasons, his delegation believed that the best course would be to press the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to consider the study, in particular the applicability of its conclusions and recommendations to the future work of United Nations bodies in that field. 3/

9. At its forty-seventh session, the Commission on Human Rights adopted resolution 1991/45, entitled "Use of scientific and technological developments for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms", in

which it took note with satisfaction of the study by the United Nations University entitled Human Rights and Scientific and Technological Development and of its conclusions and recommendations as reproduced in the note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.4/1991/38). In the same resolution, the Commission requested the Sub-Commission, at its forty-fourth session, to consider the study prepared by the United Nations University, in particular the applicability of its recommendations to the work of the United Nations in the field, and to report on any conclusions to the Commission at its forty-ninth session.

Notes

1/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.90.III.A.3.

2/ E/CN.4/1991/SR.44/Add.1, paragraph 4.

3/ E/CN.4/1991/SR.44, paragraph 172.